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# JRNL 472.01: Opinion Writing

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# opinion writing

*JRNL 472 / FALL 2018 / TT / 9:30-10:50 / DAH 210*

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## **COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

Having opinions is easy. Writing them clearly to inform and, perhaps, persuade consumers of journalism? That's tougher. It takes rigor in both writing and research. It takes confidence of thought cogently expressed. In this class, you will study, learn and improve your skills in three important areas of opinion journalism: (1) Criticism/Reviews, (2) Reported Opinion and (3) Personal Essay and, maybe, Comedy Writing.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

By the end of the semester, successful students will:

- Meet all deadlines.
- Understand differences among and be able to execute several types of opinion writing.
- Learn how to dissect and analyze the work of professional opinion writers and apply what's learned to their own writing.
- Understand essentials of well-written arts criticism, including but not limited to reviews of movies, books, music, television, performance and food/restaurants.
- Write and revise both long and capsule-length criticism of publishable quality.
- Write and revise a substantial work of reported opinion.
- Write and revise works of personal writing and/or comedy of publishable quality.
- Show through their work the solid research, reporting and context needed to elevate journalistic expression of opinion beyond possessing one.
- Provide and take in smart feedback during in-class workshops, revising as necessary based on comments from classmates and instructor.
- Show improvement in a range of skills that encompasses criticism, personal writing and informed opinion.
- Understand the value diverse sources and voices bring to opinion writing.
- Understand the importance of using numbers to provide context.

## PREREQUISITE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Students must be in good standing in the J-School's professional program.

## REQUIRED TEXT

*I Lost it at the Movies* by Pauline Kael. Buy it wherever you buy books. Used is fine. It is not available at the UC Bookstore. Please purchase by 9/15/18.

## ABOUT MOODLE/UM ONLINE

I use it extensively. You will, too! Grades, deadlines and all reading and writing assignments will be posted there. You'll also find rundowns of what I teach along with links to pieces we'll discuss. **Missing class will not be an excuse for missing deadlines and assignments. Do not email me asking what we covered in class.** I will only instruct you to check Moodle by the end of the work day.

## COURSE STRUCTURE

This course consists of three parts.

**Part 1: Criticism.** You'll begin by studying and filing your own critical writing covering a variety of media, which will include: Film Capsule Reviews, Full-Length Film Reviews, Music Reviews, a book review and others.

**Part 2: Reported Opinion.** You'll pitch, report and write a meaty op-ed on a topic of your choosing and will be encouraged to find an outlet to pitch and publish it.

**Part 3: Personal Writing.** A growing area of journalism is the personal essay. We'll study some good ones and you'll give it a go, taking what you learned practicing critical writing and reported opinion and applying that to your own story.

**Part 4: Comedy.** If we have time this semester, we'll poke around comedy and joke-writing, because who doesn't want to end on a laugh?

**Please Note:** Guests will join us on the regular in-person and via Skype. You will be required to read samples of the guests' work prior to their visit and to come to class with smart, informed questions. If a guest is secured last-minute, I'll be sending you your reading via Moodle to your university email. So link your U email to your gmail or check it often. Like you do.

**Also Note:** We will workshop several assignments in this class. Your work and peer-to-peer feedback during these sessions will influence your participation grade.

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

### Minor Assignments

You will periodically get small assignments and tasks that will help you learn what I'm teaching. These will be graded as such: You do it? Yay! You get a 100. You don't do it? Sad! You'll get a zero. I'll let you know ahead of time when I'm assigning something that falls within this category.

## Major Assignments

There will be quite a few, many of them due by 9 a.m. before our class meets. All assignments must be filed by deadline via email as an attached doc (.doc, .docx preferred). Deadlines are TBD and will be announced and posted to Moodle.

Assignments will include (and may include others! Expect to write lots! Deadlines TBD):

### Part 1: Criticism

- **The Film Capsules:** You'll write two blurbs, also called capsules or mini-reviews. They're short, tight, entertaining reviews of movies of your choosing. One will be a minor assignment (100 or zero) and one will be graded as a major assignment. **MINOR Blurb DUE: Tuesday, 9/4, 9 a.m.** **MAJOR Blurb DUE: Thursday, 9/6, 9 a.m.** Word count on each: 250.
- **The Long Film Review:** You'll file a longer review of a movie, where you'll bring in solid context in addition to opinion and plot-synopsis. Word count: Approx. 800.
- **The Book Review:** Everyone will write a review of the required text for this class: *I Lost it at the Movies*, a collection of reviews by legendary film critic Pauline Kael. You'll review this older book (originally published in 1965) by tackling its modern relevance. Word count: Approx. 800.
- **The Music Rant + Surprise Assignment:** You'll vent your spleen about a band, artist, genre you hate. Then you'll follow-up with a related, surprise assignment. Word count on rant: Approx 800.

### Part 2: Reported Opinion

- **Reported Op-Ed:** A longish, multi-sourced op-ed. Think of this as a longform reported feature that has voice and a point of view. Requirements include an approved pitch along with a preferred outlet to pitch the piece and why it will work there. Approx. 2,000 words.

### Part 3 (Personal writing)

- **Personal Essay:** You'll take on your own story, a focused one (it won't start when you were born, for example), incorporating what you've learned in the other aspects of the course. Yours can be touching, funny, important or light-hearted. Word count: TBD.

## READING ASSIGNMENTS

You'll do a good amount of reading in this class from materials provided to you by me via links and printouts, in addition to the required text that you'll review.

## Attendance

**COME TO CLASS AND COME ON TIME.** You'll find I'm more into this than others. I'll be keeping a list of all unexcused absences and people rolling in late. At the end of

the semester, that list will be considered when deciding what ends up being 10 percent of your final grade.

## **GRADING**

Major Assignments: 80 percent

Minor Assignments and Quizzes: 10 percent

Attendance, Participation and Final Assessment by Instructor: 10 percent

Rewrites: Not accepted after final deadline. Your assignments will often, but not always, benefit from instructor feedback and peer-to-peer workshops prior to final deadline.

Grades are based on a scale of 100 percent and will use the University of Montana's plus/minus system. The final grade (per requirement) will be given as a letter grade.

90 - 100 percent: A

80 - 89 percent: B

70 - 79 percent: C

60 - 69 percent: D

50 - 59 percent: F

UM's plus/minus system also makes the following distinctions:

A+: 97-100

A: 93-96

A-: 90-92

B+: 87-89

B: 83-86

B-: 80-82

C+: 77-79

C: 73-76

C-: 70-72

D+: 67-69

D: 63-66

D-: 60-62

F: 59 or lower

Please note: My grading philosophy is based on a professional scale; that means 90 percent and above is reserved for those assignments that could, without major revisions, be accepted by working editors at respected publications.

## **ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES**

- **Reread your assignments for spelling, punctuation and grammar before you file your copy to me.** I'm an employed copy editor and a real copy nerd. It matters; trust me. If you suck at grammar and spelling, let automatic spell and grammar checks help you and/or find a peer who doesn't suck to edit

you first. But don't turn it into me without editing thyself first.

- Be sure to follow the Associated Press Style Book. There is a partial online guide here: <http://www.wvu.edu/journalism/syllabi/207labmanual.htm>. A better online source is posted on the class Moodle page. Or just buy the damn thing. You'll be glad you did.
- The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction by supporting collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors and Disability Services for Students. If you have a disability that requires an accommodation, please let me know **during the first week of the semester** so that proper accommodations can be discussed and provided. Please contact [Disability Services for Students](#) if you have questions, or call DSS for voice/text 406.243.2243. You may also fax Lommasson Center 154 for more information 406.243.5330.
- Academic Misconduct and the Student Conduct Code: All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the university. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The code is available for review online at <http://www.umt.edu/safety/policies/>
- PLAGIARIASM: You will likely not be the first critic to tackle works reviewed in this class. You will likely not be the first to back up the opinions you have. Trust that I will let the internet tell me if you've lifted sentences or put your name on something that's not yours. Have pride in your work and banish the idea of turning in something written by someone else. Penalties range from failing this class to expulsion from school.
- DOUBLE-DIPPING: **You may not submit for this course any assignment or variation on an assignment that was, or will be concurrently, submitted for another class unless you receive prior approval from the professor for this course.** To do so without **documented** permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course. You are, however, encouraged to pitch and publish any and all work you do for this class.